

## Thicker Than Water by carrymehome

**Category:** Stranger Things, 2016

**Language:** English

**Status:** In-Progress

**Published:** 2019-03-08 17:13:36

**Updated:** 2019-03-20 12:09:04

**Packaged:** 2019-12-12 20:22:21

**Rating:** T

**Chapters:** 2

**Words:** 5,145

**Publisher:** [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

**Summary:** The backstory provided in Suspicious Minds gives us further information about Eleven's family tree. An idea about how that might play out.

# 1. Chapter 1

All things considered, there were few aspects of her new life that Eleven didn't enjoy. School was not nearly as exciting as she'd built it up in her mind, though she delighted in the normalcy of it all nevertheless. But the best time, she'd discovered, were the hours after the final bell rang at school but before Hopper expected her to come to the police station for a sign of life and possibly a ride home. The benign neglect that was the domain of the latchkey child was rife with possibilities and, most importantly, *freedom*.

The primary threat to these sweet unsupervised hours was the school weapon of choice: detention. Eleven wasn't entirely sure what she thought detention would be like, but she'd been careful to avoid getting into trouble at school because she didn't trust most adults to be fair (or even, frankly, not downright cruel) and she feared the unknown. The potential loss of the premium after school hours weren't worth misbehaving for her own sake, but when it came to defending her friends, priorities shifted.

Science was Mike's favorite subject and Eleven's least favorite. English was harder given her lagging vocabulary and fluency, but at least it didn't involve white coats and experiments. Mr. Smith, the science teacher was an older man who looked like he wanted to be just about anywhere but Hawkins High School. According to Jonathan and Nancy, he simply copied the same notes he'd been using for the last decade onto the chalkboard at the front of the room and you might as well just read the text book as go to class. That made it easier Mike to help Eleven study for the class in advance to prevent her from making embarrassing mistakes, but it made the class itself even less tolerable.

After a particularly confusing and mind numbing lecture on recessive and dominant genes that would have gone directly over Eleven's head but for the study hall spent previewing the chapter, Mr. Smith passed out worksheets meant to occupy the remainder of the class period with minimal effort from him.

"You'll need to record the following traits for yourselves, your siblings if you have them and your parents, then complete the grid for each

trait showing the possible permutations for dominant and recessive genes that have been passed to you and which traits you personally exhibit. Do what you can now, complete the rest for homework."

The classroom was organized into two person tables facing the front of the room and assigned seating meant to minimize talking. Eleven was lucky enough to be seated with Dustin at a rear table immediately behind Will who was stuck sitting with Melissa Johnson who seemed offended by his mere existence.

"Don't forget to include the crazy gene on yours, Zombie Boy," the fact that she was whispering did nothing to hide the contempt from her voice.

Eleven watched Will shrink and heard the words leaving her mouth before she even realized she was speaking them, "And don't forget the bitch gene on yours, Melissa."

Dustin nearly suffered an aneurysm in his attempt to swallow his laughter and ultimately tried to pass it all off as a coughing fit. Their teacher had tucked himself behind his own desk and was paying no attention whatsoever to the class.

"Whatever," the girl shot back at Eleven, "From what I hear, there are plenty of crazy genes in your family, too."

It took Eleven a moment to register that this beastly little girl was actually insulting *Mama*. Mama who was not crazy, but was a damned hero for risking her own life to try to rescue El only to tragically be trapped in the never ending dream circle for her efforts.

Eleven's eyes narrowed and she could feel he electricity build in her brain even though she could hear Mike whispering sharply, "Don't do it! She's not worth it!"

"I don't have a crazy gene," Eleven ground out, her words laced with venom. "But I do have a murder you in your sleep gene so you'd better watch. Your. Back." Melissa flinched at El's emphasis on the last three words and Eleven turned back only to find the previously oblivious teacher staring right at her. Evidently, she'd not been as quiet as she'd intended.

"Since you would rather spend your time threatening classmates," he drawled in a nasally condescending tone that made her want to explode the florescent lights hanging over his head, "you can remain after class in detention and work on your assignment then."

And that was how Eleven found herself sitting in the library after the final bell along with the class skippers and the back talkers instead of hanging out with friends. It certainly wasn't her first choice for how to spend an hour of the afternoon, but having now actually experienced detention, Eleven decided that she was completely unimpressed. Sitting in silence working on homework assignments for an hour hardly qualified as a punishment in her mind and she couldn't understand why the other detainees felt it was such a hardship. *Lightweights*, she thought unsympathetically.

"Alright ladies and gentlemen," the school guidance counselor announced, "You've done your time, detention is over. Come to the front of the room to collect your detention slips. Have your parents sign them and turn them into the office before first period or plan on staying after school again tomorrow afternoon."

That was a wrinkle Eleven hadn't counted on. She'd figured out that Hopper wouldn't be expecting her to check in until well after detention was over so she just planned on not telling Hopper anything unusual had happened at school. She still remained unimpressed with detention as far as punishments went, but was now somewhat disappointed that she would no doubt have to explain what she'd done to get herself into trouble begin with and put up with the inevitable lecture. *Still*, she thought, *it was worth it*.

She slid her books into her backpack, collected the slip of paper with her name on it from the desk at the front of the room and made her way into the nearly empty hallways. Her friends, unsurprisingly, were waiting for her release.

"We didn't want to leave you behind," Mike explained.

"And I felt kind of guilty since you only said it because you were standing up for me," Will added.

"Which, by the way, was fantastic," Dustin told her grinning. "*Bitch*

gene."

"We still have time to do something," Mike pointed out.

"Arcade?" Max suggested.

"I could go for unseating you at Ghosts and Goblins," Lucas taunted.

"In your dreams, Stalker," she snorted.

El merely listened to the banter as they walked out of the building toward the bike rack, appreciating the contrast of warm afternoon sun and crisp autumn breeze. And then she noticed the familiar vehicle waiting for her at the curb.

"You *do* know that they call the parents whenever kids get held after school, right?" Hopper asked Eleven rhetorically, he leaned on his elbow through the open window.

"I do *now*," she told him grudgingly.

"It was my fault," Will announced looking like he'd just volunteered to martyr himself.

"It wasn't your fault," Mike corrected him.

"Yeah," Dustin said, "Melissa Johnson needs to learn to keep her mouth shut."

"It really was the perfect burn," Max told Hopper as though this was an accomplishment he might actually be proud of.

"Alright, alright," Hopper barked, growing tired of the chorus that he appeared to have inherited along with Eleven. "Just tell me what happened."

"Another girl was making fun of Will," Mike spoke up, figuring he could downplay the whole thing with the proper summary, "So El told her off and got in trouble for talking while we were supposed to be working."

"Is that *it*?" the unspoken question of whether or not she'd used any

sort of powers hung in the air.

"Yes," El confirmed noting that Mike's version was technically accurate while simultaneously lacking in any detail. This was a skill she needed to master.

"Alright kid," he told her, "I'm gonna be late tonight, so I need you to go home with Will and eat dinner there. I'll come get you from the Byers', got it?"

Eleven nodded, pleased that the entire incident passed without lecture.

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Once she was no longer in hiding, Hopper at least attempted to make arrangements for Eleven to spend evenings at the Byers' whenever he knew he was going to be late instead of leaving her home alone. She suspected it had little to do with her benefit and everything to do with his, but she kept that observation to herself. Mrs. Byers was sweet and doting in a way that Hopper wasn't and she and Will would forever share a special kinship so she was happy to make the Byers' house a second home. Eleven and Will sat at the kitchen table after dinner had been cleared away, working on homework while Mrs. Byers washed the dinner dishes.

"Um, Mom?"

"Yes?"

"What color are dad's eyes?"

"Brown. I think," She paused a moment before stating more confidently, "yes, they're brown."

Another several minutes passed before Will asked, "Does he have a widow's peak?"

"A *what*?"

"You know, where your hair comes to a little point on your forehead?"

"What is this for?" she asked instead of answering.

"We need to fill out the chart on inherited traits for biology," Will explained.

The significance of the fact that Will no longer had a particularly detailed mental image of his own father was not lost on anyone.

"Just make it up," Jonathan suggested. "It doesn't matter if it's accurate, the point is to learn how genetics work."

Eleven watched the scene play out and realized that her own worksheet was bound to be equally inaccurate. She could fill it out correctly for Mama and even though it made no sense for the assignment, she based her answers on Hopper because that was her story and the only rule as important as "don't use your powers in public" was "stick to your story."

It was just a stupid homework assignment for a class she cared about almost as little as the teacher did. But still. There were right answers she could be writing and that was hard not to think about.

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"You ok?" Jonathan asked El softly, not wanting to startle her. Hopper had not yet come to collect her, his mother was busy with household chores and Will was taking his nightly shower. Eleven sat in the living room, ignoring the book on her lap and staring into space.

"Yes," she answered reflexively and then after a pause added, "Can I ask you a question?"

Eleven and Jonathan rarely spoke. Aside from the fact that they were both fairly quiet people, whenever Eleven was around, she gravitated to Will or Mrs. Byers and she'd just never really been alone with Jonathan much.

"Sure."

"Lonnie. He's your father. You and Will."

"Well, yeah. I mean, technically."

"Technically?" she asked. The word was not entirely familiar, but it didn't make sense to her in this context.

"Yes, he's our father," Jonathan clarified, "no, he's never acted like it. Does that answer your question?"

"How was he supposed to act?"

"There's not really one right answer to that," Jonathan thought a moment before continuing to answer the question. It wasn't something he'd really attempted to articulate before, though he had a clear picture in his mind of what he would have wanted from a father. "Giving a shit would be a good start. When Will was missing, Lonnie wouldn't even call my mom back. He acted sad at the funeral when he thought Will was dead, but when we found him alive, he didn't even come to the hospital. He doesn't really want anything to do with us unless there's something in it for him. Sometimes it's attention, sometimes it's because he wants us to make him feel good. But it's always for him, never for us. There are lots of ways to act like a father, but that's not it. He may be our father because of biology, but there's more to being a real father."

Eleven didn't say anything in response, but just took in what Jonathan had said.

"I'm sorry," he told her, not quite sure how to read her expression, "that was kind of a rant. He just makes me so angry, you know?"

"Papa makes me angry too," El told him sympathetically.

"Yeah, I can only imagine. But you've got Hopper," Jonathan added



optimistically.

"But we don't have biology," Eleven explained, incorporating her new vocabulary word.

Jonathan had the sinking sensation that he'd just opened Pandora's box and he tried his best to close it.

"Some family you're born with, some family you choose," he explained plainly, hoping she'd just take it at face value. "It's still family."

"But it's not the same," she pointed out.

"Says who? If someone gets married, their wife or husband is their family, right?"

"Yes."

"So see?" Jonathan concluded with more confidence than he actually felt, "Some family you choose. Still family."

"Yes, but you can *un*-choose that kind of family," Eleven countered having clearly thought this through.

"And I un-chose Lonnie," Jonathan countered back, undeterred. "The family you're born with isn't necessarily any better or worse than the family you choose."

Eleven stewed on this for a moment and then weighed whether or not to disclose her additional information to Jonathan. She had not told anyone so far, but Will often said that he could go to Jonathan with anything so she decided to take the chance.

"I have a father," she announced, "One with biology."

"Well sure you do, you'd have to," Jonathan responded without thinking and then it occurred to him that there was more to that statement than he'd first thought. "Wait a minute, do you know who he is?"

Eleven nodded slowly. "Aunt Becky showed me a picture."

"Does Hopper know?"

She shook her head, eyes as wide as saucers.

"Why not?"

"Doesn't matter," Eleven shrugged as though it didn't matter even though it mattered a lot. "He's gone anyway."

The front window lit up with approaching headlights effectively ending the conversation.

## 2. Chapter 2

Hopper arrived at the Byers after having spent the evening at a City Council meeting and he was ready for some peace and quiet.

"Hi, Hop. C'mon in," Joyce greeted him warmly as she answered the door. "You look dead on your feet. No offense."

"Whoever decided Hawkins needed a neighborhood watch has a special place in Hell," he responded, weary and annoyed. "It's nothing but an excuse for gossips to run around sticking their noses where they don't belong."

Joyce laughed lightly at his misery and though his face remained tired looking, his eyes lit up at the sound. "No one reported any monsters, I assume," Joyce continued playfully and Hopper scowled at her.

Eleven wondered silently how much longer they were going to keep up this silly pretense and just move into one house together. Another observation she kept to herself.

"You ready?" Hopper asked Eleven.

"Ready," she responded as she put on her coat and slung her backpack over one shoulder.

Hopper thanked Joyce for letting Eleven spend the evening there and she hugged Eleven goodbye before they got into the Blazer, pulled out of the Byers' driveway and headed home.

They drove in silence, Eleven deep in thought, Hopper tired of dealing with other people. Silence wasn't unusual for either of them, so it took Hopper a full day to realize something might be amiss.

"You've been awfully quiet," he observed after dinner the following night, "Even for you, which is saying something."

Eleven didn't respond at first, but Hopper kept looking expectantly at her so she gave in. "Thinking."

"About?"

"Genes," she responded unhelpfully.

Hopper sighed because he knew where this sort of conversation inevitably headed and he would play along if he needed to, but he wasn't particularly in the mood. "Is there *any* chance we could skip this whole game of Twenty Questions and you just tell me what's going on?"

Eleven paused, taking a moment to process her thoughts and what she did and did not want to share with Hopper. "Aunt Becky showed me pictures of Mama in college."

"Ok," Hopper kept his voice neutral but given that she hadn't been to Becky's in over a month, his mind was buzzing wondering what the hell kind of pictures she'd been mulling over for that long. "So what? Was there something in there that bothered you?"

"Mama had a *boyfriend*." The weight Eleven assigned to the word "boyfriend" spoke volumes.

"By any chance, was this her boyfriend round about the time you were born?" Hopper asked even though he already assumed he knew the answer.

Eleven nodded solemnly.

It was no surprise to Hopper that there was some other man out there who had actually fathered Eleven. And although he wanted to be happy for Eleven as she found the few clues to her past that existed, he couldn't entirely suppress the twinge of fear that someone else might want to take her away from him. It was the same fear that inspired him to lie to her about Terry being dead and so, determined not to make the same mistake twice, he buried it.

"What did your Aunt Becky tell you about him?"

"He was called Andrew. He was at college with Mama. He's gone," her voice cracked at the end and her eyes shone with unshed tears.

"I'm sorry, kid," Hopper told her softly, simultaneously ashamed at his

relief and vicariously hurting for El. What else could the universe possible pile up on one small girl?

"He died in a war," Eleven continued.

"Vietnam?"

"Yes," she said softly. She paused, taking deep breaths to gather herself. "You were there?"

"Yeah," Hopper responded quickly and then cleared his throat, caught off guard by how unprepared he was to have this conversation. It had been years, he'd moved on. Or at least he'd told himself that he'd moved on. "Lots of us were."

They sat in heavy silence, neither entirely sure where to take the conversation from there. And then Hopper had an idea, "You wanna take a little trip with me?"

"To see Aunt Becky?"

"No kid, someplace else. A lot further away. Too far to drive, so we'll probably want to take a train and stay overnight in a hotel."

"Where?"

"Washington."

Eleven knew from school that The Government was in Washington and seeing as how she'd had more than her fair share of bad experiences with The Government, she was confused why Hopper would want to go there. But she trusted him and she was curious about the world outside of Hawkins, so she nodded. "Yes, I want to go. Can Mike come?"

"No kid," Hopper responded, refraining from making any comments about how it wasn't healthy for two fourteen year olds to be joined at the hip like they were. "Just you and me this time."

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Eleven was always excited for any novel experience and a cross country train ride didn't disappoint. Hopper picked Eleven up from school the following Friday afternoon and they headed directly for the train station in Indianapolis. It was a lot faster and smoother than the bus ride to Chicago had been, but it got dark quickly on the eastbound train and there was little to see and not enough privacy to really talk, so it turned into a very long time to sit and think.

She held her book open to look at the photograph she was using as a bookmark. It was the only photograph she had of her father, Aunt Becky found it cleaning out old boxes and didn't know where any other photos could be. He looked young and happy, sitting next to Mama with his arm around her shoulder, captured mid-laugh by the camera. It was a black and white photo, but she could see that his hair was dark like hers and she thought that maybe his nose looked like hers.

Growing up in the lab, Eleven had a limited sense of time. She was kept deep in the interior of the lab so she never experienced days passing into nights or weather or seasons. She didn't have a school year or pets or siblings or events that she could use to measure her life. All of her days were the same: sterile rooms, florescent lights, white coats, bland meals and a never ending succession of tests. She couldn't recall her progression from infancy to adolescence and Papa never spoke of it, so she developed the rather unsettling sense that she was outside of time. Finding out that she had actual parents just like everyone else made her own existence feel more normal and grounded.

"You haven't turned a page in about fifteen minutes, kid," Hopper said, calling her out on the pretense and breaking her concentration.

Eleven wasn't entirely sure why she was keeping the picture from Hopper. She thought back on their car ride to the lab, neither really certain what the night was going to bring and the sense of needing to clear the air just in case. It was the first time she'd learned about Sara and the first time it really occurred to her that Hopper did not also exist outside of time. He had a past before her and evidently this past included another girl. *His* little girl. And though she couldn't have

explained it at the time, Eleven came to realize that she felt jealous. Maybe she didn't want Hopper to feel jealous. Or maybe that was just an after the fact rationalization. She'd not yet sorted out her feelings on the subject.

Instead of an answer, Eleven moved from the seat opposite Hopper to the one next to him and showed him the picture. Hopper recognized Terry from newspaper clippings. She looked far different than she did now, not surprising considering her current condition. But this was the first he'd seen of the young man sitting next to her.

"This him?" he asked unnecessarily and Eleven nodded.

Hopper assumed Andrew Rich was younger than him, which would make sense if he were in college in 1969. Judging by the length of his hair and his clothing (not to mention his association with Terry Ives), Hopper could safely assume he wasn't a candidate for the Campus Young Republicans. He looked like hundreds of other college students Hopper had dealt with as a police officer at what felt like hundreds of student demonstrations.

"You've got his nose," Hopper observed before handing her back the photograph.

She returned it to the safety of her book and spend the remainder of the trip pressed into Hopper's side, drifting in and out of sleep.

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Eleven only vaguely remembered the sleepy cab ride from the train station to their hotel and she passed out again immediately upon reaching their hotel room. Hopper must have removed her shoes and tucked her in because she woke up in rumpled clothes under a tangle of blankets.

"C'mon kid," Hopper prodded her the rest of the way awake, "We've got things to do today."

They arrived at the National Mall early enough to beat the crowds. Their bus had dropped them off halfway between the Washington and Lincoln memorials and it took Eleven a moment to realize that she recognized the landmarks from her civics textbook. Hopper set a pace and a direction and Eleven followed him until they came upon a massive sloping black wall that stretched out ahead of them in a triangular shape.

"This is what I wanted to show you, kid," Hopper said. "These are the names of the people killed in Vietnam. I don't know where your dad's buried, El, and I don't want to stir up anything by asking his family, so I figured at least I could bring you here so we could pay our respects."

Eleven knew about cemeteries. She'd been to the one in Hawkins, but it didn't look anything like this.

"Gone?" she asked.

"Yeah, El. All gone."

"So many."

"If you want the exact number, I'm sure we could find it, but I know it's more than 50,000. It was an ugly war. I mean, I guess every war is ugly, but this one...well, it was a lot longer than it should have been," almost as though he just realized that he was speaking aloud instead of thinking those particular rambling thoughts in silence, Hopper cleared his throat and changed the direction of the conversation. "You wanna find his name?"

Eleven nodded and slid her hand into Hopper's. She was growing up quickly, but her hand would always be small and slender relative to his. She squeezed him and he squeezed back.

Hopper produced a folded visitor's guide and map from his back pocket. He unfolded it and showed it to Eleven. "The names go in order of when people died. His name should be somewhere around here," Hopper pointed to a section past the apex at the far end of the memorial. "We'll just start at this end and keep walking until we find him, yeah?"



"Yes."

It began in 1968 and continued a long time without changing to another year. Eleven thought that must have been a very terrible year. From what she knew, Mama started experiments with Papa in 1969 and she knew it all had to do with helping the country. She wondered if maybe Papa thought his experiments would stop so many people from dying.

The sun climbed higher and the wall got taller and Eleven started to feel very small and overwhelmed. So many people gone. She thought about the people she knew who were gone because of her (Barb because she opened the gate, Benny because she was hungry, Bob because she hid from the lab instead of closing the gate) and she wondered, if she'd never run from Papa, if she'd let him use her powers to help the country, who else might still be alive? Not these people, this was before she was born. But maybe other people in other wars. Hopper had said that all wars were ugly.

"You were here?" she asked Hopper, for once desperate to start a conversation that would distract her from her own thoughts and the sick feeling building in her stomach.

"Yeah I was, kid. I signed up right out of high school." Hopper's voice took on a far away quality as he pointed out the tallest panel at the center of the wall, "This section here, these were the guys I served with."

Hopper looked slowly and thoughtfully, scanning the names from side to side. He finally laid his open palm on the memorial and he blinked more slowly than normal. After lingering there for several minutes, it was as though he suddenly remembered Eleven was standing with him. He closed his hand into a fist and tapped it against the wall. Hopper rarely talked about his past in general and never about his time in the military. She wondered what had happened with those particular people, but whatever it was, Hopper clearly wasn't going to share. "Keep going?" Hopper asked in a thick voice and Eleven once again slipped her hand in his. For his sake this time.

It wasn't that much further and they arrived at the section they were

looking for. It wasn't the tallest because they'd crossed the middle and were headed back down the other side, but this section was much taller than Eleven.

"Do you see him?" she asked anxiously.

"You start low," Hopper suggested, "I'll start high."

She worked silently reading name upon name upon name. John D. Lonsdale. Michael J Lally. Monroe D King. Clifford E. Jesse. David J Huberty. Patrick E. Hennen. Charles J Hein Jr. Gary D. Frasher. Larry A. Foster. Harry G. Flieger. Fathers. Brothers. Husbands. Sons. Thousands. *Tens of thousands*. Gone.

"Here he is, kid."

Hopper swooped Eleven up as though she weighed nothing and put her on his shoulder so she could be eye to eye with her father's engraved name. Eleven traced the name with her fingers slowly, reverently, breathing in the tangible proof of his existence. The edges of the letters were slightly sharp under her fingers, a sharp contrast to the glassy smoothness of the rest of the monument.

"If you want, you can make a kind of copy of his name," Hopper's voice broke her concentration and she realized she'd lost track of time like he had. "You put a piece of paper over the name and then lightly color over it with a pencil. My grandmother used to do it with gravestones, it's called a rubbing."

"Didn't bring any paper," she responded.

"I brought some for you or I wouldn't have offered it." Hopper set her down and reached into his coat pocket for a few folded sheets of hotel stationery and a small pencil. He demonstrated again the procedure and then lifted her back up on his shoulder so she could try it out. The name appeared as if by magic, a dark shiny silver against the gray.

ANDREW RICH

Two years ago, she didn't have any names, just a number. Now she had more names than she knew what to do with. The sun was angled

in such a way that the dark polished stone was as reflective as a mirror and she caught a glance of the face of the man holding her.

*Some family you're born with, some family you choose. Still family.*

"Hop?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"Thank you." *For finding me. For keeping me safe. For feeding me. For teaching me. For bringing me here. For giving a shit.*

"Of course," He said as though it was nothing even though it was everything. "You deserve to know where you came from."